WOMEN TRAVEL WRITERS AND THE LANGUAGE OF AESTHETICS, 1716–1818

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Introduction

In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, a pedantic Henry Tilney lectures Catherine Morland on the picturesque. He holds forth in a self-important jargon of "fore-grounds, distances, and second distances – side-screens and perspectives – lights and shades." Conferring on the country girl the social polish of good taste in landscape, he places her firmly in a secondary, mediated relation to knowledge. Though she finds it all quite odd at first – "It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day" – the infatuated Catherine is content to absorb Henry's opinions; she proves "so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape."[1]

Austen embeds her light-hearted satire of the picturesque as pretentious and rigid in a darker view of women's troubled relation to the powerful discourses and institutions of patriarchal culture.[2] Beechen Cliff reminds Catherine of Ann Radcliffe's reams of scenery in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*; Austen's parody pays ambiguous tribute to Radcliffe, who (I will argue) turns a critique of aesthetics into a sublime nightmare of women's manipulation by a powerful man in control of light and information.[3] The banter among Catherine, Henry, and Eleanor in this scene sketches an analysis of women's systematic exclusion from knowledge as cultural power. Talking of *Udolpho* reminds Henry of all the other books he has read: "I had entered on my studies at Oxford, while you were a good little girl working your sampler at home!" This patronizing reminder of women's lack of access to higher education leads to their absence from "real solemn history," which Catherine, famously, cannot bring herself to read – "the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all." Not only are women

excluded from educational institutions, they are written out of the very structure of what is known. Moreover, the social imperative of courtship and marriage sets knowledge in an inverse relation to sexual attraction, as Austen's narrator ironically notes: if a woman "have the misfortune of knowing any thing, [she] should conceal it as well as she can."[4] She echoes Mary Wortley Montagu's bitter advice half a century earlier that a girl be taught "to conceal whatever learning she attains, with as much solicitude as she would hide crookedness or lameness."[5] In such a climate few women were likely to aspire beyond the safely mediated access to learning illustrated by Henry's little lesson on the picturesque.

It is no accident that Austen chooses the language of landscape aesthetics to frame a meditation on gender, knowledge, and power. Women's relation to aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain was an equivocal one. They were not wholly excluded from aesthetic reception or production; while they did not write treatises, they did publish picturesque tours.[6] Throughout the century a handful of women made careers as painters (like Mary Moser and Angelica Kauffmann, members of the Royal Academy), and increasing numbers of women published works of fiction, poetry, drama, and even literary criticism. Much more common for the ladies of Britain's privileged classes, however, was amateur aesthetic activity. The genteel accomplishments that occupied ladies' enforced leisure and enhanced their value on the marriage market included drawing and the appreciation of scenery, as well as music and needlework. As literate Britons (though denied a classical education), they read the canonical texts of aesthetics: Addison on the pleasures of the imagination, Burke on the sublime and beautiful, Gilpin on the picturesque. Women were included in the practices of taste, but marginally. They were tolerated as second-class practitioners or passive consumers, like Gilpin's numerous "lady admirers" and drawing pupils.[7]

Addison's remarks on women readers point to the conceptual difficulties in women's relation to the aesthetic practices of polite eighteenth-century culture. Though *The Spectator* clearly identifies its primary audience as the "Man of a Polite Imagination," Mr. Spectator ambiguously declares that "there are none to whom this Paper will be more useful, than to the female World." Like Henry Tilney, he patronizes women beneath a veneer of respect:

I have often thought there has not been sufficient Pains taken in finding out proper Employments and Diversions for the Fair ones. Their Amusements seem contrived for them rather as they are Women, than as they are reasonable Creatures; and are more adapted to the Sex, than to the Species. The Toilet is their great Scene of Business, and the right adjusting of their Hair the principal Employment of their Lives...Their more serious Occupations are Sowing and Embroidery, and their greatest Drudgery the Preparation of Jellies and Sweetmeats. This, I say, is the State of ordinary Women; tho' I know there are Multitudes...that join all the Beauties of the Mind to the Ornaments of Dress, and inspire a kind of Awe and Respect, as well as Love, into their Male-Beholders. I hope to encrease the Number of these by publishing this daily Paper, which I shall always endeavour to make an innocent if not an improving Entertainment, and by that Means at least divert the Minds of my female Readers from greater Trifles.[8]

For Addison, women cannot finally avoid being positioned as aesthetic objects, rather than aesthetic subjects. Self-adornment is their "principal Employment"; even their intellectual activities enter his text as "Beauties of the Mind" whose primary importance seems to be their effect on "Male-Beholders." The tongue-in-cheek hyperbole of "Multitudes" adds to the passage's condescending tone.[9] Casting himself as women's rescuer from their love of "Trifles," Addison draws them into the cultural projects of Britain's ruling class as he relegates them firmly to the margin of the aesthetic sphere.

Addison and Austen accurately suggest the obstacles facing women who aspired to a more than marginal role in eighteenth-century aesthetics. This study presents a group of women writers who nonetheless broke out of masculine tutelage to make unrecognized contributions during the formative period of modern aesthetic thought. From Montagu in the early eighteenth century to Mary Shelley in the early nineteenth, these women struggled to appropriate the powerful language of aesthetics, written by men from a perspective textually marked as masculine. They certainly aspired to share in aesthetics' authority and prestige, but they also challenged its most basic assumptions. They did not do this cultural work in the usual genres of aesthetic theory – the discourse, treatise, or inquiry – but instead chose genres more accessible to women, travel writing and the novel, in a period when writing and publishing posed particular difficulties for women. Their critiques of aesthetics, for the most part, are not laid out as argument, but

1. Richard Earcom after Johann Zoffany, "The Founding Members of the Royal Academy," 1768. Mary Moser and Angelica Kauffmann cannot be in the room with the nude model; their portraits hang on the wall.

rather emerge from the subtly or blatantly unconventional ways in which they apply the language of aesthetics. Such oblique strategies have been amply shown to be typical of early women writers.[10] They were perhaps especially necessary when women took on a discourse as prestigious as aesthetics.

Defining aesthetics for the purposes of this study is a necessary, but by no means straightforward, exercise. The term itself, as Carolyn Korsmeyer points out, "was coined for academic discourse and does not have a strong history in vernacular usage."[11] The history of the word reflects aesthetics' exclusive and well-defended social location. Recent work on the history of aesthetics, such as that of Terry Eagleton and John Barrell, still assumes a narrowly canonical, academic notion of what counts as aesthetic thought, for which women's contribution remains invisible. Barrell, for instance, has trouble acknowledging even William Blake as a theorist because he expresses his views on art in mere prospectuses and advertisements rather than a more respectable treatise or lecture to the Royal Academy.[12] My feminist analysis must begin with a working definition of aesthetics that can encompass women's innovative ventures. Instead of restricting aesthetics to a narrow, prestigious genre of academic or theoretical writing, I define it more broadly as a discourse, or a closely related set of discourses, encompassing a set of characteristic topics or preoccupations as well as a vocabulary for talking about these. Aesthetic discourse deals with the categories and concepts of art, beauty, sublimity, taste, and judgment, and more broadly with the pleasure experienced from sensuous surfaces or spectacles. Analyzing language as discourse entails understanding it as socially and historically located, taking shape and circulating within specific institutions, practices, and genres of writing. Discourse is spoken or written from particular social positions, and it marks out a position for its speaker. The circulation of discourse, however – its inherently dialogic character – opens these features to contestation, as we will see on the example of aesthetics.[13]

The boundary between "high" theoretical aesthetics and more popular or applied writing on aesthetic topics was not a rigid one in eighteenth-century Britain. Landscape aesthetics, which particularly attracted women writers, occupied a gray area between the "high" and the middlebrow. William Gilpin, for example, set forth his influential ideas on the aesthetics of the picturesque in both

treatises and picturesque travelogues. This gave women writers the opportunity to engage with philosophical concepts without directly trespassing on the more forbidding territory of the treatise. The lexicon of landscape aesthetics found a plausible place in women's travel writing and novels; their subtly innovative landscape descriptions bear a heavy burden in my argument. Aesthetic discourse coexists in individual texts with other discourses, from early Orientalism to the liberal-revolutionary language of the Rights of Man, with varying degrees of synergy or friction. The terms of aesthetic discourse, like any discourse, though they display a significant degree of coherence, are not static: they can and do shift from one text or writer to another, and even within the same text. They are subject to appropriation and reinterpretation, negotiation and struggle, with important ideological consequences. This makes it neither possible nor desirable to give a philosophically rigorous definition of the aesthetic for the purposes of a study such as this. Struggle, slippage, and even seeming incoherence often speak more eloquently than order and exactitude. Thus I can describe, but not really define, since the conceptual entity in question remains necessarily and productively imprecise.

Aesthetics took its place in the Enlightenment division of experience that shaped and continues to shape modern Western culture.[14] Its legacy, like that of the Enlightenment generally, is ambiguous – especially with regard to gender. Analyses of beauty, art, and taste comprise a rather rarefied tradition that is almost entirely male.[15] The guiding question of this study is a version of the well-known call to historians of women to rethink the assumptions of traditional historiography: "Did women have an Enlightenment?"[16] What happens, I ask, when a woman speaks as an aesthetic subject? Taking gender seriously as a category of cultural analysis affords a new perspective on eighteenth-century aesthetic thought. We may define gender as the socially established meanings attached to physical sexual difference. It is important to keep in mind that these meanings are always intertwined with other, not obviously sexual meanings.[17] Of course, feminists cannot simply read culture as polarized along the axis of gender, but must account for multiple, interconnecting categories of difference. The discursive and social logic that structures modern aesthetics is an example of such multiple determination. The writers I will discuss are women; they are also aristocratic or middle-class, as well as very British. Their social and political

commitments vary widely, and all these factors complicate their relation to the language of aesthetics.

Eighteenth-century Europe witnessed the formation of modern aesthetics as a self-conscious theoretical discipline. This holds true whether we date its emergence to the publication of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750–58), which coined the term, or look a few decades earlier to British writers like Addison and Shaftesbury who promoted the "pleasures of the imagination." Eighteenth-century Britain was awash with an unprecedented flood of aesthetic discourse. The British thought of this period laid part of the groundwork for Kant's influential systematization of aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).[18] The women I will discuss, writing at this formative moment of modern aesthetics, challenged three of its most important founding assumptions. The first is the generic perceiver, the idea that it is possible to make universally applicable generalizations about "the" subject of aesthetic appreciation. The second is disinterested contemplation, the paradigm of reception that strips the subject's relation to the aesthetic object of any practical stake in that object's existence. The third assumption, closely related, is the autonomy of the aesthetic domain from moral, political, or utilitarian concerns and activities.[19]

The subject or perceiver is constructed in mainstream, male-authored eighteenth-century aesthetic writing through a process that entails disqualifying the vast majority of subjects and falsely universalizing the judgment of the remaining few. These moves are especially apparent in various versions of one well-known doctrine of eighteenth-century aesthetics, the universal standard of taste. Hume, Burke, and Kant all arrive at a universal standard by generalizing the response of a particular perceiver or group of perceivers. Hume's difficult task in his essay, "Of the Standard of Taste," is to uphold such a standard as binding on everyone, while deducing it from the response of a select few. Women writers found various ways of exposing the flawed logic behind the idea that aesthetic appreciation could be uniform for perceivers in widely disparate material and social situations. Women were well placed to gauge the harmful effects of this doctrine on those disqualified from full participation in aesthetic culture. The very act of positioning themselves as aesthetic subjects – appropriating a discourse constructed from a masculine point of view – had far-reaching consequences that I will examine in the chapters that follow.[20]

To ask whose judgment supplied the standard of taste is to confront the unabashed elitism of eighteenth-century aesthetics. When Addison declared in 1712, "A Man of a Polite Imagination, is let into a great many Pleasures that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving," he summarized the widespread view of Britain's social elite that taste, the capacity for aesthetic pleasure, distinguished them from the "vulgar" rest of the population.[21] Addison helped expand that elite by inviting rising merchants and manufacturers to share in genteel enjoyments like literature, music, painting, architecture, and natural scenery, while maintaining these pleasures' exclusive social cachet. The polite imagination, he says, gives its owner "a kind of Property in every thing he sees."[22] He promotes aesthetic contemplation as at once "a gentlemanly pursuit, a marker of social status, and a training in the experience of individual ownership."[23] Addison's forthright use of aesthetics in the service of social distinction recalls Pierre Bourdieu's account of the bourgeois *habitus:* "an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world." Such an aesthetic attitude – a whole way of life organized to display distance from material need – values most highly those cultural practices or kinds of pleasure unattainable by people who live in the grip of necessity, without the education or leisure to master rigorous codes of access to "high" culture.[24] Though the tastes of Bourdieu's twentieth-century France differ from those of eighteenth-century England, taste is organized by the same principles of distinction and exclusion.

It is not just class that excludes individuals from valued cultural practices. Addison's system of categories, opposing the "Man of a Polite Imagination" to the heterogeneous, ungendered "Vulgar," omits the possibility of a woman of a polite imagination – a female aesthetic subject. Shaftesbury's 1711 dialogue, "The Moralists," presents an early version of the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness, the second target of women's critiques, in a context that reveals a whole network of gendered assumptions about relations of social, economic, and aesthetic power: the interests in disinterestedness. A teacher Socratically quizzes his pupil: "Imagine...if being taken with the beauty of the ocean, which you see yonder at a distance, it should come into your head to seek how to command it, and, like some mighty admiral, ride master of the sea, would not the fancy be a little absurd?" As he contrasts aesthetic contemplation with a utilitarian attitude toward an object, in this case the

sea, Shaftesbury defines the aesthetic – on the face of it – by the absence of the needs, desires, and vested interests connecting subjects to particular objects in the material world.

The pupil replies with a rather startling logic. "Absurd enough, in conscience. The next thing I should do, 'tis likely, upon this frenzy, would be to hire some bark and go in nuptial ceremony, Venetian-like, to wed the gulf, which I might call perhaps as properly my own."[25] He alludes to the traditional "wedding" between the Republic of Venice and the Adriatic, in which the Doge sails out in state and drops a ring in the water. Mary Wortley Montagu, an unusually well-traveled woman, witnessed this rite during her stay in Italy.[26] So did gentlemen like Shaftesbury, for whom the Grand Tour of Europe was the standard finishing touch to an aristocratic education. By assuming an acquaintance with this bit of Grand Tour trivia, this whimsical example takes a great deal for granted. It further assumes a feminine gender for both objects of property ownership – tellingly exemplified by marriage – and aesthetic objects. The owning or contemplating subject is obviously gendered male. Although the principle of disinterestedness declares aesthetic contemplation incompatible with the will to possess, the context marks them both as aspects of class and gender privilege: contemplating, owning, and marrying are relations that masculine subjects can have to feminine objects. Shaftesbury embeds his version of disinterestedness in a context which strongly implies that the aesthetic subject is a property-owning male. Writings by male aesthetic theorists of the period pervasively construct the aesthetic subject or perceiver as not just a man, but a gentleman.[27] Women's aesthetic writing, as it tampers with the gender of the perceiver, tends to expose the interests that inform supposedly disinterested acts of aesthetic appreciation.

The paradigm of disinterested contemplation is closely tied to the emergent understanding of aesthetics' relation to the other disciplines of modern culture. The eighteenth century gave us the "modern system of the arts," the notion that painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry "constitute an area all by themselves, clearly separated by common characteristics from the crafts, the sciences and other human activities."[28] The classification of human endeavor exemplified by d'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia* (1751) segregates aesthetic experience from other forms of knowledge. Modern theories and practices of art are

grounded in this assumption of an autonomous aesthetic sphere – cut off, in particular, from instrumental, utilitarian, and political pursuits. We can gauge the continuing power of this model, for example, on formalism's long-lasting hold over twentieth-century painting and sculpture and the critical discourse about these, as well as over literary criticism, which has spent decades coming to terms with formalism's legacy.[29] The institution of the museum as a setting for disinterested aesthetic contemplation, deliberately sequestered from ordinary life, gives a material location to the quasi-religious faith in an autonomous aesthetic sphere. This is the third assumption that eighteenth-century women's aesthetic writing goes far to undermine. Their revisionary treatments of landscape aesthetics point to the often inhumane consequences of denying the connection between aesthetic practices and the material, social, and political conditions of human existence.

These women writers attack the very foundations of modern aesthetics. As they do so, they reconfigure central problems of aesthetics whose solution by mainstream theorists was narrow and unsatisfying. Terry Eagleton asserts that aesthetics was born as a discourse of the body,[30] but it is striking to recognize the lengths to which male theorists were prepared to go to keep distasteful aspects of embodiment at arm's length. Aesthetic discourse distances its generic subject, or unmarked category, from the body – a body that disreputably clings to subjects marked by class, gender, or race. Women who try to speak as aesthetic subjects confront this conceptual dissymmetry. Aesthetics also privileges the visual: not gratuitously, but as an integral part of its conceptual structure. Sight, as the least "embodied" of the senses (with the possible exception of hearing), was congenial to a discourse for which embodiment marked inferiority. Kristina Straub has commented on eighteenth-century Britain's fascination with the visual as a site for the symbolic enactment of asymmetrical power relations.[31] Female bodies were constructed as spectacles, objects for a masculine gaze; this, too, palpably hinders women's efforts to position themselves as aesthetic perceivers. Woman's conventional status as spectacle furthermore conflates the aesthetic with the erotic – categories compulsively held apart by the ideological imperative of disinterested contemplation. We will see female subjects, faced with these inhospitable features of aesthetic discourse, find ingenious means to disrupt and reconceive them.

Women writers from Mary Wortley Montagu to Mary Shelley register their dissent from powerful doctrines that persisted long after their lifetime, and still persist, despite a rising chorus of critique from historicists, feminists, postmodernists, and practitioners of cultural studies. These early revisionists are especially timely in the context of today's movement to dismantle the aestheticist structures and standards of literary study in favor of interdisciplinary, materially situated methods for studying the history of culture. Their concerns speak to my own as a historicist feminist critic – even though I often find in their writing a somewhat daunting entanglement between what I, from my twentieth-century perspective, would call structures of oppression and impulses toward liberation.[32] How, for example, can Montagu's proto-feminism coexist with her aristocratic bias? How can Janet Schaw be both a proto-feminist and an arrant racist? How can we reconcile Mary Wollstonecraft's sometimes narrow middle-class prejudices with her liberationist political program? The construction of my study does not try to minimize these embarrassments. On the contrary, I have deliberately put together a selection of writers that will not let us be essentialist about gender or simplistic about feminism, that refuses to authorize easy generalizations about the way women think and write. By calling attention to these writers' diversity, as well as their common concerns, I aim to broaden our sense of the scope of women's endeavors in this period and our means of theorizing the articulation between gender and the other factors that inflect identity and subjectivity.

At the head of the procession of women writing the language of aesthetics stands the imposing figure of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the subject of Chapter 1. Her eloquent, sarcastic letters were published posthumously in 1763 and achieved long-lasting popularity (Mary Shelley read them avidly in 1816). Montagu is the only writer I will discuss who is not specifically engaged with landscape. She is an indispensable precursor to later women writing the language of aesthetics. She struggles with the fundamental issue they would revisit, if not resolve: the play of social power in the relation between spectator and spectacle. Women's culturally prescribed status as aesthetic objects, spectacles for a masculine gaze, helps explain Montagu's difficulty in claiming the position of the aesthetic subject. Her writing further discloses an uneasy tension between her identities as an aristocrat and as a woman. The class

character of British aesthetic discourse underwent a significant shift during the century from 1716, when Montagu embarked for Turkey, to 1818, the eve of Peterloo. Her emphatically patrician aesthetics contrasts with the middle-class, anti-aristocratic stance of later writers like Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth.

Aesthetics' place in British culture was also in part a product of global expansion and contact with non-European peoples, whether an Oriental world power like the Ottoman Empire or a dominated population like the Afro-Caribbean slaves in Janet Schaw's travel journal. Mary Pratt suggests that European Romanticism may have originated not in Europe, but "in the contact zones of America, North Africa, and the South Seas."[33] One might be tempted to argue similarly about aesthetics in general. Not every text I discuss thematizes empire, but it will be clear that a dynamics of exclusion by race or nation, as well as gender and class, structures aesthetic discourse in this period. Aesthetics harbors a strong presumption in favor of the hierarchies that structured British society. Its exclusionary logic constructs not only "the Vulgar" and women, but also non-Europeans, as foils against which to define the "Man of a Polite Imagination." Montagu nonetheless manages to turn aesthetics against another discourse of domination, early Orientalism, whose crude stereotypes populated seventeenth-century travel writing on Turkey. Her aestheticizing rhetoric de-eroticizes and dignifies the Turkish women whom earlier travelers had relentlessly objectified.

Janet Schaw, by contrast, is largely complacent about aesthetics' tendency to reinforce inequality. Her unpublished journal of 1774–76, the topic of Chapter 2, like most eighteenth-century writing on the West Indies, effectively beautifies colonial slavery. But as she sketches the island gender system, articulating gender to aesthetics and racial discourse, Schaw distances herself from the creole women whose exaggerated femininity was a cornerstone of colonial ideology. Positioning herself as aesthetic subject, she holds the conventions of femininity – in particular those of feminine beauty – at arm's length. Women's appropriations of aesthetics, we realize, are not discursively or politically predictable. They are governed not by some feminine essence, but by specific historical pressures and rhetorical exigencies that give each text its distinctive texture. Each proves differently instructive about the possibilities and limits of women's relation to the aesthetic.

Though she uses the language of aesthetics to describe Caribbean vistas, Schaw is not a full-blown picturesque tourist. It was not until the 1780s and 1790s that the practice of scenic tourism reached a critical mass and its descriptive conventions coalesced. Women writers from Helen Maria Williams to Mary Shelley were closely engaged with these conventions, which Chapter 3 explores in detail. Both scenic tourism and the related practice of estate gardening apply the aesthetics of the picturesque, whose manner of constructing its generic subject shares basic premises with other areas of mainstream aesthetics. Writings by Addison, Shaftesbury, Hume, and Reynolds, as well as Gilpin, Price, and Knight, display a powerful abstracting impulse, a willed distance from particular objects in the world and the needs and desires that propel individuals toward them. The key to understanding this denial of the particular is the symbolic connection between material particulars and groups of people traditionally thought of as trapped in them, defined by their bodies, as opposed to their minds: the laboring classes and women. Discourses and practices that deny the particular work divisively, a familiar effect of ideology,[34] to enforce the distinction between those positioned within the (masculine) "universal," and thus granted the authority of the aesthetic subject, and those whose "particularity" excludes them.

Eighteenth-century estate gardening reconfigured land in a symbolic economy that distinguished the gardenist, as a property-owning man, from a feminine "Nature" and from the landless laborers who dug his lakes and clipped his shrubbery. Both gardening and scenic tourism frame a scene and carefully detach the viewer from it. The tourist became a disinterested aesthetic subject by eliding the traces of the practical relation between a place and its inhabitants. Human figures in the picturesque scene were reduced to faceless ornaments, like Gilpin's ubiquitous banditti. Aesthetic distance thus reinforces the social distance between the aesthetic subject and the "Vulgar." In such a symbolic economy it is no wonder if a woman, who both was and was not "Vulgar," had trouble occupying the position of the aesthetic subject. Chapter 3 concludes with a brief discussion of Ann Radcliffe's picturesque tour, *A Journey made in the Summer of 1794 through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany,* a text whose abrupt alternation between picturesque scenes and traces of the ongoing war helps focus our attention on the paradox of the female picturesque.